



Mentoring in the Age of

#MeToo

In the last year, workers across industries have been buffeted by revelations about harassment and misconduct in work settings. With no societal consensus on what constitutes sexual harassment, organizations must establish guidance for proper behavior in collegial interactions – particularly in mentor/mentee relationships, where there is often an uneven balance of status or power.

William LeFevre, CRM, CA

Have you ever been in a meeting, conversation, after-work activity, travel situation, or other work-related situation in which you felt uncomfortable because of what was said or suggested to you or to a colleague?

You are not alone. A Marketplace-Edison Research poll published in March 2018 showed that more than a quarter of the women (28%) and 14% of the men surveyed reported sexual harassment in the workplace. (A December 2017 CNBC poll showed similar results: 27% of its female respondents and 10% of its male respondents reported workplace sexual harassment.) Before the “#MeToo” movement dominated the headlines this last year, harassment in all its insidious forms was a silent workplace scourge.

In the last year, workers across industries have been buffeted by revelations about harassment and misconduct in work settings. The careers of both prominent and relatively unknown individuals have been affected – even cut short – after allegations or documented examples of their misconduct. The careers and lives of many victims have been inexorably altered, and numerous victims have left their professions out of fear, shame, frustration, or retaliation – including nearly half of the women cited in the Marketplace-Edison poll. Workers have had to come to terms with a profoundly changed landscape, with different written and unwritten rules for how to interact with colleagues.

New Rules for Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

Given this, mentoring, as an integral part of work life, will need to change to reflect the new landscape in which we work and the new rules we must abide by. Mentoring is often undertaken between peers who are unequal in power and status, meaning we need to adjust how we as colleagues approach mentoring programs to make them better and to safeguard both mentors and mentees.

While there are many mentorship models (both formal and informal), one of the tried-and-true aspects of mentoring is that there is benefit from peer-to-peer mentoring. Often a more senior professional will be paired with a new professional to impart industry or even organization-specific knowledge.

More often than not, the information imparted touches on cultural, political, or inside knowledge that may be qualified but not easily quantified. Indeed, the type of knowledge typically imparted in peer-to-peer mentoring is knowledge that does not translate well to other, more quantifiable, training models. As a result, peer-to-peer mentoring can be an incredibly important part of the learning process for relatively new professionals. One needs only to look to numerous examples throughout history of mentees who credit their professional mentors for giving them the insights to become successful themselves. Since mentoring has real intrinsic value, it's worthwhile to explore several traditional men-

toring models and the potential pros and cons of each in this era of #MeToo.

Mentoring Models

One-to-One Mentoring

Direct one-to-one mentoring is one of the most-used mentoring models and is used across professions to impart knowledge between professionals. One-to-one mentoring may be formal and codified within organizations or may be more informal, with little in the way of checks and balances, policies, guidelines, or even processes for redress if problems arise.

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Formal one-to-one mentoring has the pros of often being structured with identifiable goals for the mentor and the mentee. Good, formal, direct one-to-one programs should include components of calendaring, conducive location, mentor training, policies and guidelines for all mentoring contact, clear communication of what subject matter will be covered, clear feedback, and codified ways to redress any issues that may arise between the mentor and mentee.

Potential negatives of formal one-to-one mentoring include the fact that formal one-to-one mentoring may stifle creative communication and may be too narrowly focused to best benefit both mentors and mentees. In addition, the possibility exists for abuse of the mentor/mentee relationship if the program is not closely monitored or if policies and guidelines are not strictly adhered to.

The pros of informal one-to-one mentoring are that it is fluid, may be relatively unstructured, and may be a truly interactive discussion between mentor and mentee without many of the potential power/information barriers inherent in the mentor process. In addition, informal one-to-one mentoring has a greater potential for tailoring to the specific needs of the mentor.

Potential cons of informal one-to-one mentoring include a greater risk of mentees not gaining the knowledge they need and the risk of inappropriate or unwanted behavior that could negatively affect the mentee (including, but not limited to, harassment).

Both types of one-to-one mentoring offer an excellent way of imparting important and not easily quantified information.

Group Mentoring

Group mentoring is another model that is widely used across professions. It may benefit from the dynamic of the group and may foster cross-pollination of ideas that may not exist in one-to-one mentoring. Group mentoring may allow and foster greater identification between peers on the same level and may be a better fit if there is a past organizational history of harassment or other insensitivities to cultural/racial/gender and other differences. Group mentoring, like one-to-one mentoring, may be formal and codified or more informal.

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The pros of formal group mentoring are that it is often structured and formal with identifiable goals. Good formal group programs should include components of calendaring, training for mentors, policies and guidelines for all mentoring contact, clear communication of what subject matter will be covered, clear feedback, and codified ways to redress any issues that may arise between the mentors and mentees.

Potential cons include the fact that formal group mentoring may stifle creative communication and may be too narrowly focused to best benefit both mentors and mentees. In addition, the possibility exists for abuse of the mentor/mentee relationship if the program is not closely monitored or if policies and guidelines are not strictly followed.

The benefits of informal group mentoring include: fluidity, relatively unstructured format, and may be a truly interactive discussion between the mentors and mentees without many of the potential power and information barriers inherent in the mentor process. In addition, informal group mentoring has a greater potential for being tailored to the specific needs of the mentees.

Potential cons of informal group mentoring include a greater risk of mentees not gaining the knowledge they need and the risk of adverse behavior that could negatively affect the mentees (including, but not limited to, harassment).

Another potential area of concern comes with the direct interaction between mentees in both group and individual interaction – and the risk of inappropriate or unwanted behavior resulting in harm from both types of interaction must be addressed. Both types of group

mentoring offer an excellent way of fostering group relationships and the open dissemination of information not necessarily found in one-to-one mentoring.

E-mentoring

The e-mentoring model has recently come into wide acceptance across professions. Unlike group mentoring and peer-to-peer mentoring, e-mentoring is often more formal and codified in subject area, calendaring, structure, and delivery.

Pros of e-mentoring include availability of remote access between mentors and mentees, ability to easily add content, ease of calendaring, and efficiency. E-mentoring may also remove some communication barriers between professionals of unequal power or status, especially when the mentee is shy or nervous. Additional pros include delivery of content by various methods, including instant messaging, e-mail, connecting via social media and specialized e-mentoring software, and access to communication history.

Cons of e-mentoring include the fact that it is not as intimate as in-person communication. E-mentoring does not necessarily lend itself as well as in-person models to imparting qualified – versus quantified – information. It also has the potential for miscommunication (after all, much of how we communicate as humans is non-verbal in nature). E-mentoring can be less spontaneous than other forms of mentoring, and it requires technology awareness and the active participation of all participants. The caveats about providing clear policies and guidelines are as relevant to e-mentoring as they are to one-on-one and group mentoring.

Keys to Positive Mentoring Experiences

So, how do we design mentoring programs to maximize impact and minimize potential liability and abuse? The foundation should be clear policies and guidelines and a solid list of best practices for the mentor and the mentee, regardless of the type of program an organization uses. Following is a good list of components for any program to implement and follow:

- *Mentor/mentee screening*, including background checks for both mentors and mentees, when possible. Human resources (HR) should be consulted to review any history of harassment on the part of anyone potentially involved in mentoring.
- *Clear policies and guidelines for a mentor program*, including conduct guidelines, communications guidelines, and policies on behavior. Clear policies on methods of contact as well as locations of meetings must be included.
- *Clear parameters on acceptable subject matter*
- *Calendaring with start and end dates and, whenever possible, guidelines on acceptable hours of contact and acceptable avenues for in-person meetings (if pertinent)*

- *Impartial, third-party feedback on mentoring* to the mentor, the mentee, and, if needed, the organization's HR department
- *Codified ways to address any issues that arise between mentors and mentees*

The professional world has changed in the wake of “#MeToo,” and rightly so. The way we mentor must adapt as well. In this case, change is for the best: Stronger, better designed mentoring programs will be a selling point for you and your organization. **E**



About the Author: William LeFevre, CRM, CA, is the corporate records manager for FCA LLC US and was previously senior archivist at Wayne State University. With nearly 30 years of professional experience, he has served in many leadership roles with ARMA International and the Institute of Certified Records Managers and has been a frequent speaker and author on archives, information management, and library science topics. LeFevre earned a bachelor of arts degree from Albion College and a master of science in library science degree from Wayne State University; he is also a Certified Records Manager and a Certified Archivist. LeFevre can be contacted at William.Lefevre@fcagroup.com.



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